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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 007501

SIPDIS

NSC STAFF FOR POUNDS

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SUBJECT: EGYPT: SENIOR NDP OFFICIAL MAINTAINS OBJECTIONS TO  
INTERNATIONAL ELECTION MONITORS

Classified by Charge d'Affaires Stuart Jones for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

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Summary  
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1. (C) During a September 22 meeting, Ahmed Ezz, a senior member of the ruling NDP, told visiting DAS Dibble that Egypt aspired to the highest standards for the coming parliamentary elections. However, Ezz asserted that a GOE invitation to international monitors was highly unlikely, not because the NDP opposed it, but because Egypt's judiciary, which supervises the elections, and the Egyptian public were hostile to the idea. Departing from GOE orthodoxy, Ezz downplayed the organizational skills and electoral potential of the illegal but tolerated Muslim Brotherhood. Ezz's insistence that the GOE's hands are tied by the judiciary and public opinion is disingenuous and no doubt reflects the reservations harbored by GOE/NDP decision makers about international monitors. End summary.

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Self-Congratulations on the Presidential Election  
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2. (C) DAS Elizabeth Dibble, accompanied by Charge and poloff (notetaker) called September 22 on Ahmed Ezz, a senior member of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), at party headquarters in downtown Cairo. Ezz, who ran President Mubarak's reelection campaign and is very close to Gamal Mubarak, was eager to present his views on the September 7 presidential election. He described Mubarak's 88 percent of the vote as a major achievement, given the unprecedented level of criticism and rhetorical attacks the president had suffered. Popular support for the President was genuinely strong, he claimed. In a series of opinion polls conducted by the NDP, Mubarak "never polled less than 82 percent," adding that the professional pollsters they had commissioned discounted fear as a factor that might inflate the results.

3. (C) Ezz admitted that the NDP had been disappointed by the turnout of 7.5 million voters, noting that their goal had been 9 million. Ezz blamed the low turnout in part on the overzealous practices of the judges, who created long lines by only letting one voter at a time enter polling places, even if there were four ballot boxes. Judges were also often overcautious in matching prospective voters to names on the voting list turning away many qualified voters. Ezz said the GOE had been shocked and disappointed at the negativity of initial coverage of the election in the international media, focusing on individual irregularities instead of the positive big picture. Over time, he believed, accounts in the western media were being more gracious and objective in their assessment of the election. Even prominent regime critic Hafez Abou Seada, though he had identified some flaws in the process, did not challenge the overall result, Ezz observed.

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Ambitious Goals for the Parliamentary Elections  
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4. (C) Asked about preparations for the coming parliamentary elections, set for three rounds beginning November 8, Ezz asserted that the NDP was determined to adhere to the highest standards of conduct and predicted that they would be the most transparent and credible elections Egypt had ever staged. Ezz said that after the coming parliamentary elections, nine out of ten Egyptians would admit that they were free and fair. (Comment: Ezz was vague about specific steps the NDP/GOE would take to improve the conduct of this year's polls. End comment.)

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Judicial Independence = No international monitors  
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5. (C) Responding to DAS Dibble's points on the importance of international monitoring, Ezz allowed that he understood the benefits of this approach and had privately lobbied for it. However, Ezz continued, the bottom line for the GOE was the domestic "perception of acceptability," and asserted that

international monitoring crossed this line. According to Ezz, the opposition of the Egyptian judiciary to international monitoring was the biggest stumbling block. The judges believe inviting international monitors is tantamount to questioning their ability and integrity, he claimed. Ezz recalled that the Presidential Elections Commission had only very grudgingly and under great pressure (from the NDP, he claimed) agreed to allow domestic monitors to enter polling stations.

16. (C) The Egyptian people hold the judges in very high esteem and will follow their lead on this issue, he asserted.

(Comment: Our own soundings indicate that there is no consensus within the Egyptian judiciary on the acceptability of international monitors - judges range in their views from enlightened liberals to xenophobic nationalists. End comment.) Ezz also offered that the NDP had conducted a public opinion poll on the acceptability of monitoring and found that 50 percent of those questioned had responded with a "don't know." However, of the 50 percent prepared to offer an opinion, 80 percent had said they were strongly against international election monitors, he claimed.

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Domestic Monitors Key  
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17. (C) DAS Dibble reemphasized to Ezz the importance the USG attaches to international monitors, and cautioned that the parliamentary elections would be closely scrutinized, without the benefit of novelty that came with Egypt's first competitive presidential election on September 7. Continuing, DAS Dibble asked Ezz what concrete positive steps Egypt would take in order to present the coming parliamentary elections as fair and credible. Ezz said that Egypt would be able to point to an expanded role for domestic monitors as an indicator of progress.

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Who's Afraid of the MB?  
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18. (C) Ezz strongly downplayed possible gains for the (illegal, but partially tolerated) Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in the parliamentary elections. (Note: There are currently 16 "independent" members of parliament affiliated with the MB. End note.) Ezz denied the "myth" that the MB were well organized and potentially poised to perform well at the polls. "We are much better organized than they will ever be," he asserted. "They will probably get some seats, but there will be no major gains," he predicted confidently.

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Comment  
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19. (C) Ezz's dismissive view of the Muslim Brotherhood is a departure from GOE orthodoxy. The GOE has traditionally been given to warnings that the MB would sweep to power and set up a backward Iran-style regime if the electoral floodgates were opened. On international monitors, Ezz may have been correct in asserting that the GOE would have to overcome the reservations of members of the judiciary, but the judges' purported opposition is also too convenient a pretext. The reluctance of GOE/NDP decision-makers to invite international monitors probably reflects both their own nationalist sensitivities and their cognizance of the manipulation and fraud that has characterized past parliamentary elections - and may well be evident in the November polls. End comment.

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